

The Director

The Board discussed the attached Memo this morning, agreed with it by and large, and thought that it would interest you.

ABBOT SMITH
Director
National Estimates

25 April 1968

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

25 April 1968

STAFF MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Some Pressures on Hanoi in the New Phase

1. It is generally felt that in a prolonged period of fighting and talking the Communists would have a significant advantage over the allied side. Simply stated, in such circumstances the view is that Hanoi would be better able to withstand pressures to end the war than the US and the GVN. Nevertheless, it is wrong to assume that there would be no significant pressures on the DRV.

2. First of all there are the more obvious factors: the high casualties, the destruction and dislocation in the North, and so forth. These have been the focus of continuing investigation and judgment. Invariably the conclusion has been: Hanoi can continue the war. Given the decision to add a diplomatic aspect to the military struggle, however, certain new pressures on Hanoi would come into play. Probably they would not

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be decisive, but they seem important enough to make it clear that "fight-talk" tactics present Hanoi too with a very complicated hand to play.

3. Hopes for Peace. There has been war in Vietnam longer than in any other country save China in this century. Vietnamese have been fighting since 1945-1946, with an interlude in 1954-1960. Well over half a million have been killed on the Communist side since 1945. In the last two years over 200,000 of the NVA/VC have died in combat, an equivalent in US terms of about 2 million! Probably 200,000 men from North Vietnam have been sent to South Vietnam or Laos in the last two years. This approaches the number of all able-bodied men reaching 17 years of age each year. This toll on a generation of Vietnamese in the North cannot help but have some affect on the leaders regardless of their dedication or fanaticism. The impact may not be as great as a Westerner would imagine. And according to the testimony of almost all visitors to Hanoi, the regime has apparently been effective in maintaining popular morale and elan. Yet, keeping the population committed to "total victory" once peace talks begin would probably be more difficult.

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4. The regime realizes this, of course. A captured political directive, dated 4 April, warns the troops of a NVA division in the South not to be misled by President Johnson's "deceitful scheme," or by the DRV's response, which "can adversely effect the assessment of the situation and ideology of our troops." It promises that "when we have to accept diplomatic meetings with the US aggressors, such action will not change our basic policy on the resistance to Americans for national salvation." A typical example of the regime's general concern was reflected in a major address last December by the party secretary (Le Duc Tho) responsible for organizational affairs:

"In the anti-US national salvation undertaking we must constantly struggle against every manifestation of demoralization, accommodation and fear of difficulties and hardship."

In sum, there are bound to be vague pressures for peace in North Vietnam. The regime can contain them, even exploit them, but it cannot entirely ignore them.

5. A Big Victory. A more tangible pressure arises out of the actual situation in the South. Hanoi is cautiously moving into talks, not in ideal circumstances, but in a situation somewhat short of its expectations and desires. The "fight-talk"

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stage, in the North Vietnamese definition, is supposed to be a more effective form of struggle than merely talking or only fighting. The two aspects are to be mutually reinforcing.* But of prime importance is the ability to influence the course and the outcome of talks by significant military action. The question is: are the NVA/VC forces capable of military initiatives likely to have such effect?

6. The recent spate of rumors and reports that another wave of attacks is imminent illustrates well the Hanoi high command's problem. The Tet offensive was successful in part because it was a surprise in its timing and scope. Units were able to infiltrate cities, large units moved long distances without immediate detection. Now, however, the entire country is much more alert to indications that might forecast an attack. The chances of undetected infiltration into target areas are reduced and the rapid movement of large units becomes more hazardous.

* In the captured document referred to above, the following is of interest: "troops should be indoctrinated to fully realize that in the fight against our enemy, we must closely coordinate our military and political struggles with diplomatic attacks ... we cannot afford to bear an illusion of peace and relax our weapons."

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7. This time the attacks will have to succeed primarily because of overwhelming strength. And this means large concentrations, which are vulnerable to allied firepower and mobility whenever they form up. It also means a careful choice of targets which are militarily weak but politically significant, and there are only a few obvious ones. The costs rise, of course, and the chances of success are diminished. Yet if new attacks cannot be mounted because of spoiling operations, (e.g., operations in the A Shau Valley) or if they are launched and fail, then Hanoi probably will come to realize it cannot impose its terms at the conference table. It is, after all, Hanoi's aphorism that nothing can be gained at the bargaining counter that has not already been won on the battlefield.

8. What are the chances for a successful offensive, which everyone seems convinced will have to come in the next few weeks or months? Obviously, the "battle" for Khe Sanh should be an object lesson in the futility of trying to predict Communist tactics or the outcome of any specific engagement. It would be foolish to underestimate General Giap's cunning or daring. It is also impossible to forecast accurately the political or psychological impact on the allied side of any particular Communist military move.

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But as a general proposition it is becoming more difficult for the Communists to achieve military successes of such magnitude as to have major influence on the outcome of talks with the US.

9. The Chinese Critics. Another form of pressure on Hanoi is more difficult to describe, but it probably exists: namely, that Hanoi is gambling to some extent that it can successfully manipulate the fighting and talking, and the price of this gamble, in part, is its relationship with China. Peking, of course, has already fired its warning shots. The Chinese were surprised and chagrined at Hanoi's concession; they made it plain that there can be no substitute for military victory. Thus far, Hanoi has not lost its cool, but there is a small hint of polemics in some of its commentary, and a faint air of defensiveness.

10. This may prove to be only an interesting sidelight, but it is possible that Hanoi will feel some compulsion to prove it made the right move at the right time. It could be that Hanoi will be loathe to allow an early collapse in the contacts and talks, if only to prove to the Chinese that they were wrong. The Soviets, and even more the East Europeans would encourage the North Vietnamese in this.

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11. All of the above does not lead to any firm conclusion. It is merely meant to demonstrate that life is complicated for Hanoi as well as for Washington. The North Vietnamese leaders, moving into what they call a "new situation," must be deeply conscious of the contradictory pressures now acting on their decisions.

WILLIAM HYLAND

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